

Investing In Education

— Changing Futures



By Carrie Johnson

Nothing is more important to the future of New Jersey than making quality education available to all, including offenders. As a result, education is a major part of the total correctional experience in the state, which focuses on changing the behavior of offenders through planned learning experiences and learning environments.

The New Jersey Department of Corrections regards correctional education as a critical element in its effort to assist offenders in successfully reintegrating into society. The mission of the Office of Educational Services is to provide offenders with academic, vocational and life-skills programming that meet their demonstrated needs and prepares them for return to the community as productive citizens. Individualized education programming seeks to develop or enhance knowledge, skills, attitudes and values of incarcerated youths and adults. Through continued involvement in the programs offered, offenders can assist themselves in overcoming negative self-images and move forward to positive, meaningful lives.

Each of the 14 correctional facilities offers educational programs, which reflect the demonstrated needs of the offenders. While there are site-specific variations relative to vocational and special education programs, all offer basic skills, pre-secondary, secondary, postsecondary and English as a Second Language (ESL) academic programs, as well as a full complement of appropriate support services. Each academic program is designed to service students and their grade-performance expectancies. The vocational programs provide participants with the skills, competencies and attitudes necessary for successful entry into employment upon release. The programs also serve a collateral function as they provide students with meaningful use of time while they are incarcerated.

Recruitment activities in each facility share similar characteristics. Upon entry, each inmate is provided a comprehensive orientation of available academic and vocational program offerings. During the orientation phase, offenders are individually interviewed by education staff to identify specific educational preferences and needs. Based on

needs, preference and length of stay, counseling is provided relative to program enrollment.

All students entering education programs are administered the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) and are appropriately placed based on test results. A student education plan with initial test scores and program assignments is prepared to guide the student's progress. The average reading grade level of offenders entering the New Jersey correctional system is 5.7, as determined by the TABE.

There are two critical and interrelated factors that impact on all education programs — population served and length of stay. Correctional students have much in common, the most significant being incarceration, the wide discrepancy between chronological age and grade level expectations, and a very low motivation level. Educational services are generally viewed as an option, which serves to engage the offender in meaningful academic and/or vocational skill development. Additionally, all of the correctional education programs have a "revolving door." Students enter and exit programs as a result of court commitments, institutional transfers, parole, reassignments and a host of other reasons; therefore, classes are not static. Teachers rarely end a "school year" with the same students who initially enrolled.

As a result of these and similar factors, the educational programs in each facility share certain common characteristics: instruction is individualized to the greatest extent possible, methodologies are almost exclusively diagnostic-prescriptive (a methodology used to design an appropriate individualized instructional program to teach, re-teach and assess the learner), and individual and group counseling are constant and intensive. There is also a real commitment to provide students with structured experiences, both academic and social, which will enhance their return to the community as productive citizens.

There is factual evidence to support the value and cost-effectiveness of educational programming such as a decrease in recidivism rates and/or inmate infractions, and enhancement of employability skills. A full complement of

quality educational programs also reduces inmate idleness. In addition to its basic education programs, under the leadership and guidance of Commissioner Devon Brown, the Office of Educational Services has implemented several programs. These programs include the Stock Market Game, moral reconnection therapy, television for educational use, drug education programs and character education. These enhanced educational opportunities have diversified the curriculum and increased offender participation in educational programming by 10 percent.

The Stock Market Game

These days, the stock market is the biggest attraction in town; a white-knuckled roller coaster filled with eager thrill-seekers, gripping the safety bar with one hand and trailing ticker tape with the other. It is, as always, under close scrutiny. Investors watch it to conduct the business of the day, and Washington keeps close watch to gauge the strength of the economy. But it also has some unlikely monitors, who, with perseverance and a little luck, have managed to make a profit during uncertain times.

With *The Wall Street Journal* in hand and an initial \$100,000 investment, these monitors track their holdings and adjust their portfolios on a daily basis. But unlike the buttoned down MBAs in Manhattan's financial district, the offenders of the New Jersey DOC become would-be investment wizards behind secure walls through an inspiring educational program.

The offenders taking part in the Stock Market Game, which is run by Securities Industry Associated under the auspices of the New Jersey Council on Economic Education, Kean College of New Jersey, work in three- to six-person teams in an effort to increase the value of the team's portfolio by more than any other team during the course of the competition. And no, the \$100,000 initially allotted to each team is not real money.

The game is a 10-week simulation of Wall Street trading. The educational objective of the Stock Market Game is to stimulate and educate in the areas of investment, management of finances and budget by researching stocks, studying financial markets, choosing portfolios and following companies in the news to make decisions on whether to buy, sell or hold. Participants can compete against other teams within their respective facility or with participants in other correctional facilities.

The most recent installment of the game ran from October to December 2003 and featured more than 740 teams made up of juvenile and adult offenders, public school and college students, and corporate employees throughout New Jersey. When the final profits and losses were tallied, offenders from Garden State Youth Correctional Facility in Yardville secured the eighth highest gross of all competing teams with \$115,781.97. Sixteen of the 61 New Jersey DOC teams that participated made a profit or nearly broke even.

Prior competitions have placed New Jersey offenders above teams of interns from UBS Paine Webber and far above the hundreds of participants from New Jersey mid-

dle and high schools. State prison executives take pride in the offenders' accomplishments. "In a time when real investors are struggling to gain a significant foothold in the market, our offenders performed admirably, without the benefit of inside secrets or a traditional education in investment banking," said New Jersey DOC Director Patty Friend, who oversees the prison system's education department.

This program is, therefore, invaluable for a number of significant reasons. Among them, it provides a window to a world, which almost certainly had been beyond the offenders' experience prior to their incarceration. It also introduces them to new avenues of reasoning, deduction and decision-making, which may serve them well when they return to their communities. Moreover, the DOC's interest is less in producing junior stockbrokers than in creating well-rounded individuals with integrity, a sense of purpose and the ability to work well with others. The Stock Market Game employs all of those traits and more.

During a recent ceremony, Brown saluted a victorious team from Mid-State Correctional Facility in Fort Dix, which had turned its \$100,000 into more than \$149,000 during a former competition. "The Stock Market Game illustrates two important concepts," Brown told the participants. "The first is the advice of a broker, a three-piece suit and a subscription to *Barrons* are no guarantees of success in the world of stock trading. The second is that possession of a gun or knife are not guarantors of financial security. The only security that weapons will buy you is the kind offered [at Mid-State]. But let us not forget that it is part of the human experience for one to stumble and sometimes fall in our quest to learn how to walk." Brown, who introduced the program to a Maryland detention center during his previous employment, continued, "You may have indeed fallen, but you are striving to stand up. Undeniably, the simple, unvarnished truth is that there is money to be made — a great deal of money — if one employs his brain rather than his brawn. Only your ambition and, yes, your persistence will set limits to your accomplishment. While a certain element of luck played a part in your success, it was your efforts, your research and your perseverance that determined the outcome."

Moral Reconnection Therapy

Within each education department, New Jersey has implemented the moral reconnection therapy program. Preliminary reports indicate a significant reduction in infractions for offenders participating in this therapy. Moral reconnection therapy is a well-researched and well-documented systematic, step-by-step cognitive-behavioral treatment approach specifically designed and developed for treatment of offenders to insulate them from criminal behavior. Its focus is to instill discipline, positive self-esteem, accomplishment and a higher level of moral reasoning through cognitive-behavioral and cognitive-restructuring skills programming. Moral reconnection therapy significantly raises moral reasoning levels, life purpose and other positive personality variables. It represents a

redirecting of decision-making from higher stages of moral reasoning and combines education, group and individual counseling, with structured exercises designed to foster moral development in treatment-resistant clients. It addresses beliefs and reasoning and is designed to alter how clients think and make judgments about what is right and wrong. The system uses a series of structured exercises and tasks to foster development of higher levels of moral reasoning as well as address other important treatment areas such as confronting personal beliefs, attitudes and behaviors, assessing relationships, facilitating identity formation, and enhancing self-concept and self-esteem.

The 16-step program, which begins with relatively simple tasks and exercises, progressively increases in complexity and difficulty. Each step is designed to alter how participants think and make decisions about what they should or should not do. Offender participation in moral reconnection therapy has been shown to reduce recidivism. By itself, reducing recidivism is a laudable goal. More praiseworthy, however, is changing people's lives so that they become more responsible, respectable and caring; so that they build stronger character and are able to care for their families and themselves.

Television for Educational Use

Television for educational use has been implemented systemwide in the New Jersey DOC. As offenders spend a considerable amount of time viewing television, an array of educational videos is used to engage them in a meaningful activity when they may otherwise be idle on the housing unit. This medium is used as an instrument to broaden, as well as augment, the formal education program. Under this plan, television viewing by offenders during designated hours of the day and evening is centrally controlled so that only educationally oriented tapes are broadcast. This initiative provides the department a direct means to monitor the type of program inmates view, while ensuring that such access is constructive and educationally enriching.

Drug Education Program

The education department has implemented a drug education program whose objective is to provide useful drug/alcohol information to offenders within a structured, staff-monitored venue. Information is presented via lecture

and video material. This program services offenders who have the least severe drug problems (no physical addiction indicators). Information provided in the program assists them in making better life decisions regarding future drug and alcohol use.

Character Education

In March 2003, the DOC, through a New Jersey Character Education Partnership Initiative grant, implemented a character education program using the Raoul Wallenberg Committee of the U.S. Study of Heroes curriculum. The goal of the program is to promote positive character traits among offenders — a population that is least likely to have heroes as role models. This multicultural interdisciplinary program revitalizes the study of true heroes — heroes from various periods of history, and of different ethnic backgrounds and areas of accomplishment. Participation in the program helps offenders differentiate between being a hero and being a celebrity. Offenders learn that real heroes are those who rise above their circumstances to make a positive difference in the world. Offenders are inspired to look at their lives to gain insight into nonviolent methods for solving disputes and to incorporate virtues into their daily lives, as well as understand differences, discrimination and prejudice.

Conclusion

Without the necessary education and skills, approximately 25 percent of released offenders will be rearrested within six months and 40 percent within one year, according to New York State Corrections Education. Recognizing the nexus between criminality and literacy, the New Jersey DOC has taken a giant leap forward by investing in quality educational programs for the offenders charged to their custody. The ultimate goal is to protect the public by avoiding victimization, lowering recidivism and improving the quality of life for ex-offenders.

The New Jersey DOC does not want ex-offenders to simply survive after incarceration; it wants them to thrive.

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